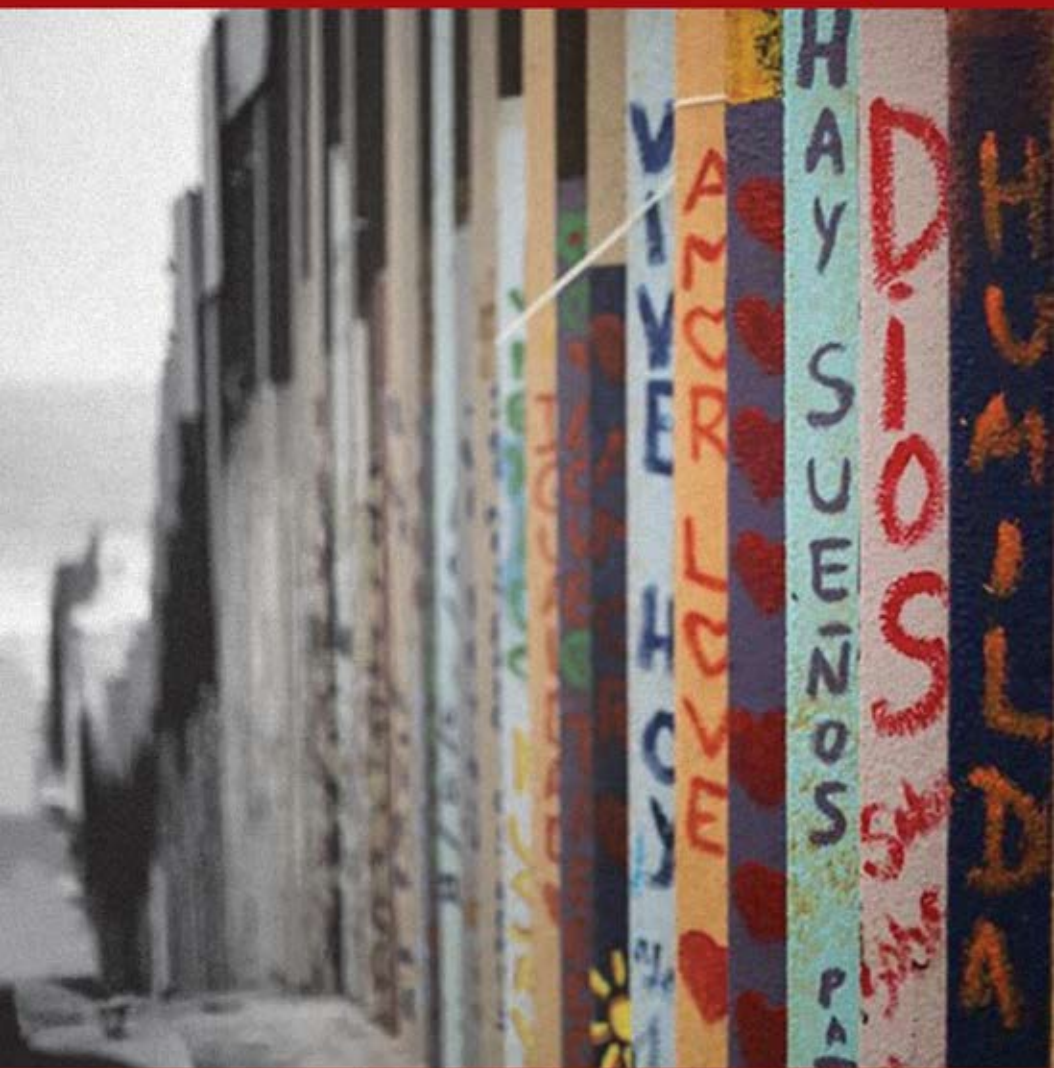


AGAINST THE WALL

STORIES



ALBERTO ROBLEST

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English translation by Nicolás Kanellos



Arte Público Press
Houston, Texas

Against the Wall is made possible through a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.
We are thankful for its support.

Recovering the past, creating the future

Arte Público Press
University of Houston
4902 Gulf Fwy, Bldg 19, Rm 100
Houston, Texas 77204-2004

Cover design by Mora Desjgn
Cover photograph by Enrique Chiu

Names: Roblest, Alberto, 1962- author. | Kanellos, Nicolás, translator.

Title: *Against the wall : stories* / Alberto Roblest ; English translation by Nicolás Kanellos.

Other titles: *Contra la muralla*. English

Description: Houston, Texas : Arte Público Press, [2021] | Translation of: *Contra la muralla*. |

Summary: "In the prologue to this inventive collection, the exhausted protagonist finally reaches the doors to paradise after an arduous journey, but the longed-for entrance doesn't have a handle or keyhole and there's no bell or intercom. He considers climbing over it, but the wall reaches to the sky. He thinks of magic words that might open it and even kicks it, to no avail. The long, difficult trip has brought him to nothing except a concrete wall surrounded by desert. The characters in these seventeen stories find themselves with their backs against the wall, whether literally or figuratively. They run the gamut from undocumented immigrants to faded rock and soap-opera stars and even the Washington Monument. The eyes of the world focus on the blackened obelisk, which is covered in millions of insects, as government forces attempt to deal with this national emergency! Several pieces deal with people who are lost or long to go back in time. In one, Ramírez wakes up disoriented to discover he-along with untold others-is trapped in a bus terminal, unable to leave the Lost & Found area that's piled high with thousands of suitcases, trunks, backpacks and packages. Strange dreams pervade the nights of others. A female monster, *la chingada*, chases a man through a maze full of garbage and starving children, and he wonders if he should just confront his destiny. A worker falls asleep on the subway after a triple shift and dreams he's in a pool with Death swimming towards him. Exploring topics such as immigration, corruption and police abuse, Roblest expertly depicts the loneliness and uncertainty of people struggling to survive, but who yearn for something more elusive. These moving portraits reflect the lives of those who must breach the walls—physical, social, political or cultural—blocking their paths"—Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021027348 (print) | LCCN 2021027349 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781558859258 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9781518506659 (epub) | ISBN 9781518506666 (kindle edition) | ISBN 9781518506673 (pdf) Subjects: LCSH:

Roblest, Alberto, 1962—Translations into English. | LCGFT: Short stories.

Classification: LCC PQ7298.28.O2397 C6613 2021 (print) |

LCC PQ7298.28.O2397 (ebook) | DDC 863/.64—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021027348>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021027349>

∞ The paper used in this publication meets the requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

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Prologue

for Tomás Rivera . . . And the Earth Did Not Devour Him

They said that was the way. I spent many days crossing mountains and valleys, crossing two rivers and a desert mountain range, where there was nothing but dilapidated adobe houses, some tattered windmills and junked cars covered in sand. I finally arrived, shed my backpack and stretched my arms, took off my boots to let my feet rest. It had been a long trip. I wiped my brow with a tissue and walked up to the door, touched it to make sure it was real. I smiled. I had arrived . . . finally.

I found myself right in front of the door to paradise, a glorious entryway, a beautiful door. I knocked with my knuckles, then my fist, then with both of them. I searched for the door handle, the keyhole in the lock, but couldn't find it, nor a bell or an intercom. Perhaps the door was locked from the inside. I pushed it hoping it would give, but no. Then I thought it might be a sliding door and tried again, but the door seemed unmovable. I thought about climbing over it, but the walls seemed to reach up into the sky and the door presented no footholds. I tried pushing again, this time with all I had. It occurred to me that in many tales doors open with magic code words or rhymes. I traced out what would be a code in the

dust at the foot of the door. I came up with tongue twisters, songs, my grandmother's favorite sayings, I screamed. . . . At one point, I desperately kicked the damn door that was looking more like the entry to a bunker or a fortress. Everything I tried was useless. Sweating, I decided to sit down on the ground. I guessed that the only recourse was to wait for someone to exit and I'd scramble inside, although that was really a dumb idea: Who the hell would want to leave paradise? I put my boots back on, I stood up and walked a couple of kilometers looking for the terminus of the wall. I came back and tried to come up with some other ideas. I was annoyed. There was nothing I could do but wait and grieve. I sat down on a boulder with the hopes of someone with a key or password coming along and I could go in with him. I took a sip out of my canteen—there wasn't much water left, nor food. I looked one way, then the other way, nothing except for the door and the great wall. The door was at the end of the road I had traveled. From one side to the other ran the concrete wall, the desert, nobody, nothing.

BLACKENED OBELISK

1

The morning sun revealed yellow plastic police tape around the whole mall area, from Pennsylvania Avenue to Independence, and from there up to 6th. There were about a hundred cops and criminologists, fire trucks, ambulances. They were deployed because the obelisk, the Washington Monument, was covered in insects, which were first thought to be ants or locusts, but as the morning light shined it became obvious: they were roaches, roaches of all sizes. The first person to report the strange event was Emerson Martínez, a bicycle cop on his last round. At first, he thought blown spotlights had darkened the monument that was the pride of the city and symbol of the entire country. But as he approached, he had other ideas: someone had covered the spotlight with some type of film or, worse, an evildoer had splashed black paint on the monument's surfaces, and if that was the case, that could not be anything else but an act of terrorism. He kept thinking. Perhaps it was some type of art installation created by crazy artists who had been rejected by the arts council. . . . What a surprise it was when he got within ten yards and discovered that the dark stain was moving, as if swaying to the rhythm of the hypnotic sound it emitted. Martínez did

not know what to think. The stain was insects— cockroaches to be precise. He dropped his bike to the ground, approached cautiously, took out his gun and chambered a bullet, then stopped to carefully examine the thing. No doubt about it: roaches. He'd seen enough of them in his kitchen, in the kitchen of cheapo restaurants, at the police station, at homes and rent-controlled apartments and even at old Georgetown mansions.

He spoke into his radio once again, making it official to his supervisor at the station. Officer George Luca listened. Not believing his ears at first, he made Martínez repeat the information several times. Thousands of roaches were covering the obelisk from peak to base.

“Shit, that is bad news,” Luca said.

It certainly was, and it was coming at the end of his shift on the Friday before the Memorial three-day weekend. Gritting his teeth, George Luca called his captain, who decided to talk to Martínez directly. He listened to the patrolman attentively and then passed the bad news on to his superiors, who then showed the same skepticism and had Martínez repeat the story a few more times. Not twenty minutes had gone by when the police chief, in person, burst into the Capitol Hill station and asked Luca if the bicycle cop who had reported the incident was sound of mind. He then asked if the cop used drugs or was under the influence of prescription medicine, along with Martínez's badge number.

“No, boss. Martínez has nothing like that on his record . . . an' he got high grades at the academy . . . and, uh . . . he's been in great health.”

Strange, the police chief thought as he pulled out his cell-phone and asked his close confidants, who were finishing rounds downtown, to head for the scene of the crime. In less than fifteen minutes they had confirmed the initial report:

thousands, no millions, of dark roaches were all over the monument, from top to bottom. The bad news was soon made public and began to circulate from one side of town to the other, through official channels, on TV, the internet, virally.

2

Once the news hit the internet, there was a surge in memes, fake news and off-color jokes, as well as conspiracy theories. Never before had so many sirens been heard in Washington DC, not even at the attempted assassination of President Ronald Reagan or the inauguration of Barack Obama. By the time the sun had fully risen, everything was different: city streets were deserted, as were the main highways; schools and colleges shuttered, along with government offices; tourist offices paralyzed; social and cultural events throughout the city canceled; the Pentagon and other security agencies crazed; the daily newspapers rushing to change the lead stories; the Metro and other public transportation delayed; physical as well as viral traffic erratic; the local radio stations flooded with calls and numerous news blogs; the politicians jockeying to present their best face to the public; and the rubberneckers jostling each other on the nearby streets to get the best vantage point for showing their thumbs-up to their selfies. In summary: chaos.

Two of the largest firearm businesses with offices in the city offered drastic suggestions to put an immediate end to the problem—as long as a contract was forthcoming, of course. One of their proposals sent to Congress was for deploying an experimental weapon that sent out something similar to microwaves: they would cook the enemy, in this case the roaches, in a matter of seconds.

“And what about the cherry trees around the monument and the other flora and fauna along the river?” someone asked.

“Well,” responded the CEO, “we’ll take care of the main problem. Collateral effects are not our concern . . . they’re secondary. We’ll have to think about a second contract to cover the collateral damage.”

The other corporation proposed placing a giant cover around the obelisk, like a giant, hermetically sealed bag, and then filling it with a poison gas to kill the insects in a matter of seconds . . . nothing experimental, something already tried and true.

“And what about the secondary effects of the gas?” someone else in the meeting asked. “What happens when you take the cover off?”

This CEO’s answer was similar to the first corporate leader’s, but he added the hope that the gases would be totally absorbed by the filthy insects. If not, they’d have to re-think the outcome, possibly replace the soil and grass around the obelisk and “vacuum” the place with a machine of some sort.

By dinnertime, the city was on pins and needles, focused on the operation to come. The eyes of the whole planet were placed on the obelisk, which seemed to have various layers of cockroaches. The roaches themselves were reproducing incredibly fast, feeding on each other ad infinitum. Some of the smallest ones began to move out toward the perimeter and were being smashed by men in HazMat suits wielding large flyswatters that were becoming more and more useless. Journalists were speculating, environmentalists developing theories and fatalists insisting it was a conspiracy. A religious extremist made his way through the crowds and began shouting through a megaphone about the end of the world and the

seven plagues of Israel. By nightfall, the scene was darkening as no one could come to an agreement.

Martínez, who had not taken his eyes off the obelisk, said to himself, “Fuckin’ scientists. Shouldn’t the roaches have taken cover during the day? They’re supposed to be hypersensitive to light and instinctively look for shade. Today they look like they’re sunning themselves at the beach. It’s incredible. . . .”

With the eyes of the world on the city he led, the mayor took advantage of the news, good and bad as it were, to press for an increase in the municipal budget and to lobby for the political and economic independence the city did not enjoy as the “federal district.”

3

Various high-level meetings were called in Congress and at the White House. The chiefs of the armed services proposed launching a missile to finish off the invaders once and for all. Of course, that meant the destruction of the obelisk. At first, all were confounded by the proposal.

Someone at the conference table stood up and shouted, “Obliterate the obelisk?! . . . Unthinkable!”

The proposal’s mastermind, a twelve-star general, took a long swig of coffee from his cup and calmly, somewhat dramatically, said, “Of course. We can always build another one. That’s what we do in wartime. We blow it all up and then we put it back together again. Simple math: to rebuild is good. It generates profits, profits generate interest and that’s the way of capitalism.”

The eyes of a lobbyist representing the construction industry grew as big as saucers, and he added, “Seems to me that’s a wonderful idea. That way, we can build an even bigger

obelisk, twice as high. And that way, we can change the regulations on building heights in the city that are so restrictive and obsolete.”

The assistant to the lobbyist, a very interesting kid from Harvard, took his boss’ suggestion even further: “That way, the city can have taller buildings and change its looks . . . with modern skyscrapers.”

Another associate of the lobbyist immediately stated that, once the obelisk was destroyed, it would facilitate the building of a giant bunker with various levels that would allow access to the Potomac River, the Metro and Rock Creek Park. The mouths of more than one of those present started to water at these proposals, and more than one politico thought about buying properties in the vicinity so they could be re-sold and torn down to make way for tall buildings and condos. In their mind’s eyes they envisioned DC as a new New York City.

One of the old guard generals recommended using Napalm so as to burn those pests into crispy critters.

The meeting lasted almost until nightfall, with a variety of proposals on the table. While this had transpired, one of the insects emerged from the mass on one side of the obelisk and began to grow very large. And almost imperceptibly the other insects began to enter, one by one, the mouth of the larger roach, which continued to grow into immense proportions. Upon receiving reports of this, the armed forces chiefs met again and, thinking it the worst possible scenario, called in an infantry and an air force division. A state of siege was declared and all onlookers were removed from the area. The site was cordoned off and the press was prohibited. The soldiers evacuated Foggy Bottom and moved the residents into hotels around the city. As a national security precaution, all telecommunications and internet were being monitored and controlled. The president and vice president were escorted to

secret bunkers for their own security and that of the nation. On the way, the president tweeted instructions stating, “Every single news report, every television camera shot must be censored and controlled, now that we are in a state of emergency and a possible attack.”

“Is this a Trojan Horse, this time taking the form of a roach?” was a frequent question asked.

Running through the minds of alarmists were the Godzilla and King Kong movies, but instead of a giant ape they envisioned a giant roach flattening tanks, pulling jets from the sky and scattering the frightened population.

4

Before the night was over, for some two and a half hours, millions of roaches entered the mandible of the giant cockroach until not one more could fit. The soldiers, CIA officers and the national security forces stood in trepidation at the extraordinary sight. The thousands of police cars and Army vehicles seemed to shrink in size as the giant roach grew almost to the height of the obelisk itself. Suddenly the monster moved its head from side to side, rubbed its antennae and took two steps before falling to the ground on its back.

There was a soft murmur and even prayers from the crowd, suddenly followed by an outburst of weapons. Then a deadly silence followed. As spotlights shined over the insect, it started to move its legs and rock its body, trying to right itself like a turtle getting to its feet. But as quickly as it began it suddenly lay lifeless, like a tired, old fat man. The obelisk itself began to crack from its base to its peak. There were a couple of tense minutes. Then the giant roach looked around, opened its wings, stretched out its legs and became rigid. The soldiers, police and security personnel waited anxiously for

orders from their commanders, who expected the hellish insect to hop to its feet at any moment and attack everyone.

Fear permeated the city in silence, the macabre, rigid, brutal silence that had once overtaken Washington at the death of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Then, to top it all off, the insect exploded into a million tiny pieces, “. . . staining everything over a half mile around the obelisk,” as a journalist put it. What had rained down was nothing more than millions of tiny, golden cockroaches that scattered into the sewers, cement cracks and niches over by the Capitol building.

All stood in suspense, then disgust.

Some philosophers thought it all an omen of what was to come; some intellectuals saw it as a metaphor for capitalism and the politics of globalization. The construction company representatives pounded the conference table in disappointment at having lost a great opportunity. The frustrated corporate munitions reps cursed the skies for having their plans disrupted. Poets inspired by the happening drafted sad prayers, and only the novelists, just the fiction writers, saw it as more than just a symbol . . . as something else.

“Rot Is Stalking” was the banner headline the next day.